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Developing a tool to help EAP writers with collocations in real time

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Corpora have given rise to a wide range of lexicographic resources aimed at helping novice users of academic English with their writing, from core academic vocabulary lists (Coxhead 2000; Paquot 2010; Simpson-Vlach and Ellis 2010; Ackermann and Chen 2013; Gardner and Davies 2014), to textbooks (e.g. Schmitt and Schmitt 2005; McCarthy and O'Dell 2008), and even a dedicated academic English learners' dictionary (Lea et al. 2014). However valuable these resources may be, novice EAP writers may not be aware of them or may not be sufficiently aware of the lexical shortcomings their emerging texts so as to trigger the need to use such resources in the first place (Frankenberg-Garcia 2017). Moreover, even if EAP users did wish to look up a word while writing an essay, dissertation, research article or similar, doing so could interrupt their thoughts and distract them from getting their ideas down on paper.

The Collocaid™ project aims to address this problem by developing a tool to help EAP writers with academic collocations in real time. To achieve this, we have begun working on the compilation of a lexicographic database that supports novice EAP users' collocation needs (Frankenberg-Garcia et al. 2017). Parallel to this, we are developing a tool that will enable writers to instantaneously visualise collocations from within a text editor (Roberts et al. 2017).

In the first part of this paper, we outline the rationale underlying our lexicographic coverage and preliminary visualisation decisions. More specifically, we describe the criteria used for (1) choosing which collocation bases (nodes) to cover, (2) selecting collocates and examples from academic English corpora, and (3) integrating collocation suggestions and feedback for miscollocations into a text editor.

In the second part of the paper, we describe the task we have designed to test the usability of our experimental prototype. With the tool in its development stage, lexical coverage is not yet optimal. Therefore, to observe how users interact with the tool, the challenge was to conceive an authentic EAP writing task which elicited a predictable range of collocations for which we could guarantee coverage. The task chosen was inspired by part one of the IELTS academic writing paper, which involves writing a short passage describing a chart or diagram. We explain how a bespoke corpus of sample answers to similar IELTS questions combined with EAP tutors' introspections was used to determine which collocation bases to focus on, and how we piloted the task to assess its adequacy.

We conclude the paper by outlining the next steps in our research.

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